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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 001797

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [ASEC](#) [EAID](#) [SO](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: INCREASED ONLF ACTIVITY, POLICE PRESENCE REPORTED
IN SOMALI REGION

REF: ADDIS ABABA 606

Classified By: Political/Economic Chief Michael Gonzales for reasons 1.
4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Reliable sources in Ethiopia's Somali Region report ONLF attacks on Ethiopian Government (GoE) road construction workers, increased scrutiny of passenger vehicles, and looting of commercial goods in the Somali region. Increasingly violent ONLF attacks on police and military elements lead NGOs to fear they will be targeted or caught in fighting. Sources also report increased recruitment of clan-based "Special Police," including recruitment of children as young as 12, and of extrajudicial killings by the Somali region's Special Police. While Somali Region Head of Security Abdi Mohamed Umar controls the Special Police, it is increasingly unclear who controls him. While the increased activity on both the ONLF and government sides does not reflect a substantial shift in types of activities pursued by either, it does highlight the heightened vulnerability of the local population and risks posed to those seeking to respond to their needs. End summary.

CHANGE IN ONLF TARGETS AND ALLIANCES

12. (C) On July 22, a reliable USAID partner operating in Ethiopia's Somali Region met with PolOff and USAID to express concerns regarding security in the Somali region. According to the partner, the paved road linking Harar, Jijiga, and Degehabur has become increasingly unsafe. Although the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) had previously supported road construction as a component of development, ONLF fighters attacked an Ethiopian Roads Authority (ERA) team in early June, burning five vehicles and kidnapping 18 workers. (Note: ERA is a branch of the Ethiopian Government. End Note.) Thirteen workers have since been released. The attack may have been motivated by sightings of ERA vehicles providing transport to Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) personnel. Another credible Embassy source who observes events in the area first hand confirmed these events and numbers. The ONLF has also begun looting commercial vehicles transiting the road. While sources have not reported any ONLF violence toward non-GoE entities, they are applying greater scrutiny over people transiting the region, forcing passengers to disembark and submit to searches.

¶3. (C) While the increased ONLF activity does not reflect a substantial shift in ONLF tactics, the increased violence does raise concerns for the safety of NGOs operating in the area. As the security situation worsens, they face a Faustian dilemma: strengthen relations with the regional government and ENDF in an attempt to protect themselves from the possibility of ONLF attacks, only to risk further targeting by the ONLF because they are viewed as ENDF sympathizers or informants. (Note: To date, the ONLF has not targeted NGOs or NGO workers as a standard tactic, but NGOs' fears stem from a combination of the increased ONLF-security forces conflict in the region and the uncertainty of whether the insurgent group may shift its tactics. End note.) NGO personnel have been compelled by ENDF and regular police personnel to report ONLF activity, and have faced beatings and death threats from these entities if they do not comply. (Note: The partner stated that while his organization's official position is not to report ONLF activities to local authorities, he could not vouch for his employees' actions when faced with government intimidation. End note.)

¶4. (C) The partner also stated that while as recently as 10 months ago his organization was "warmly welcomed" by the ONLF and it was clear that the ONLF was fighting against Al Shabaab-affiliated extremist elements, the welcome has now disappeared. He claimed that growing numbers of United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF, formerly al-Itihaad al-Islami) and other foreign fighters (nationality unknown) are entering Ethiopia from Somaliland. In addition, the partner was aware of reports that certain communities in the

ADDIS ABAB 00001797 002 OF 003

Adfer Zone may be shifting their support to the ONLF as a result of growing frustration that their alliance with the GoE is not resulting in development.

SURGE IN RECRUITMENT OF "SPECIAL POLICE"

¶5. (C) Last year, the Embassy received reports that the Somali Regional State Security Bureau had established a "Special Police Force," or militia, comprised of local officers with minimal training, for the purpose of deployment to areas of heavy ONLF activity. The partner reported that in the past four months again there has been a surge in recruitment of these officers. Typically, Somali regional President Dawood Mohammed meets with clan elders to rally support for this effort, and Head of Regional Security Abdi Mohamed Umar (a.k.a. Abdi Illi) follows up with a demand for a given number of youths for recruitment from each clan sub-group. Elders are given food, cash, or weapons in exchange for providing new troops. The partner stated that he himself had witnessed Special Police recruits as young as age 12.

¶6. (C) The partner and separate Embassy source reported that earlier this month, the Special Police engaged ONLF fighters between Degehabu and Kabsidakas, with between 40 and 65 Special Police killed, and 23 of the wounded sent to Kabsidakas hospital. Prior to this, Abdi's driver was reportedly killed by an IED in what was suspected as an assassination attempt on Abdi. The Special Police are also reported to have engaged in extrajudicial killings during a "public execution" at a Degehabur market in which two suspected ONLF members were gunned down.

SIGNS OF POWER STRUGGLE WITHIN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

¶7. (C) Finally, the partner reported a power struggle between Somali regional President Dawood and regional security chief Abdi, and an unclear chain of command within the regional government. For example, the partner had witnessed Abdi interrupting Dawood in public meetings, and while it is clear that Abdi controls the Special Police, it is unclear who

controls Abdi. It is possible that he is receiving orders from the ENDF, or from National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister Abay Tsehay in Addis Ababa. In light of this struggle, the partner encouraged Post to make clear through high-level visits to Somali region and personal contact with President Dawood that the USG supports the president and appreciates his increased openness and engagement to address humanitarian concerns.

COMMENT

18. (C) While the increased activity on both the ONLF and government sides does not reflect a substantial shift in types of activities pursued by either, it does highlight the heightened vulnerability of the local population and the risks posed to those seeking to respond to their needs. In light of the insecurity in, and inaccessibility of, the Ogaden region, it is difficult to confirm the details and extent of the reported increase in fighting. We are particularly concerned about the perceived cooling in the ONLF response/reaction to NGOs.

19. (C) A delegation from the ONLF is currently in the United States and seeking a meeting with State Department representatives. In light of dynamics on the ground in the Ogaden, we strongly recommend that Africa Bureau officials meet with this delegation. Our message to them should be clear - the need to renounce violence and the imperative of protecting civilians and humanitarian workers. By giving the insurgency the opportunity to express directly its complaints of GoE abuses against the Ogadeni population, we can combat the growing perception among the people of the region that the U.S. supports -- and is even behind -- GoE abuses. Combating such a perception will be critical in protecting against any aggression against USG and/or other western humanitarian personnel who may be operating in the Ogaden. Any meeting with the ONLF in Washington must occur with the knowledge of the GoE, so that they understand our intent and

ADDIS ABAB 00001797 003 OF 003

purpose. If/when a meeting is scheduled in Washington please inform Embassy Addis so that we can manage the issue with the GoE. End Comment.
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